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SUBJECT: GOP TURNS TO CHAVEZ TO BOOST CANAL REFERENDUM

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) The GOP has invited Venezuelan President Chavez to attend the June 22 Congreso Anfictionico in Panama in an attempt to sway leftist voters, trade unions, and students before the upcoming Canal expansion referendum, Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis Navarro told the Ambassador in a June 1 meeting. Chavez's attendance is not yet confirmed, but the MFA believes he will not pass up this chance to celebrate his hero Bolivar. END SUMMARY.

Anti-U.S. Platform

12. (SBU) VP/FM Lewis Navarro told Amb. Eaton June 1 that he realized Chavez's visit would be a platform for anti-American rhetoric, but thought Chavez could help persuade leftist voters to support the still-unscheduled Canal referendum, a must-win vote for the GOP. Confirming the FM's views, Vice Foreign Minister Ricardo Duran told POL Counselor June 6 that Chavez's visit would be especially useful in selling the expansion to radicals and students who do not support the expansion project. Duran said the GOP was not concerned the visit could backfire and anger mainstream Panamanians who dislike Chavez.

Sole Visitor

13. (SBU) MFA Deputy Protocol Director told POL Specialist June 1 that the GOP originally intended to make this a big event with regional heads of state but has informally advised area presidents not to come to Panama around this time. Chavez is the only head of state invited to the Congreso, which commemorates the 180th anniversary of Simon Bolivar's 1826 congress of newly independent Latin American countries. The event will be attended by members of the diplomatic community.

Comment

14. (SBU) Chavez's proposed visit is the GOP's latest move to build up Lewis Navarro's leftist credentials within the ruling PRD for a 2009 presidential run. The invitation follows Panama's May vote for China, Cuba, and Venezuela for the UN Human Rights Commission, which Lewis Navarro has publicly defended, and the 2005 reestablishment of relations with Cuba, which Lewis Navarro had pursued. Although Lewis Navarro is President Torrijos's apparent pick for his successor, he lacks support from the leftist segment of his

party. Reaching out to Chavez is a clear attempt to boost his standing with the PRD left while trying to dissuade leftist trade unions and students from causing trouble prior to the Canal expansion vote.

15. (SBU) The GOP is betting that Panamanians who already support expansion will not change their minds over Chavez, and that undecided voters who dislike Chavez will not turn against the Canal project. Radical leftists, however, may well be swayed or at least neutralized if Chavez speaks in favor of expansion. The GOP's influence over the media could also help to frame Chavez's visit to favor its goals. The GOP's gamble lies in not being able to control public reaction to what Chavez may say and do during his visit. It is still unclear what other motivations lie behind the GOP's invitation, but at this critical juncture for the GOP, the GOP is counting on a beneficial boost from Chavez on many fronts.

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